

VZCZCXRO6271
RR RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHVI #0394/01 0911146
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 011146Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY VIENNA
TO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1791
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2235
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENNA 000394

SIPDIS, SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EB/TPP/BTT JACK BOBO, JFINN; EUR/PPD ASHLEY
WHITE
USDA FOR FAS EPORTER, EJONES, DYOUNG, SNEON, GLAIDIG

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [TBIO](#) [KPAO](#)
SUBJECT: Agricultural Biotech Outreach Shows Faint
Glimmers of Hope In Austria Despite Political Hardline

REF: a) STATE 52602, b) STATE 160639 c) Vienna 312

Sensitive But Unclassified - Not for Internet
Distribution

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. From March 2 to 4, Embassy Vienna carried out a series of biotech outreach activities. The target audience of the program consisted of agricultural students, farmers, farmers' representatives, and government officials. Two U.S. farmers from Iowa reported about their long-term experiences in planting biotech crops. The farmers met with about 150 farmers and agricultural experts within 6 meetings. The presentations of the U.S. experts were followed by extended discussions. Despite a broad political front against agricultural biotechnology in Austria, most of the attendees showed keen interest in green biotechnology and acknowledged the potential benefits of biotech crops. Coincidentally, on the day the outreach visit started, the Government of Austria (GoA) was marshalling votes in Brussels to block the lifting of Austrian import bans on EU approved biotech varieties -- giving Post cause for concern that the visit would become contentious -- but the speakers were greeted with polite and genuine interest. The outreach events were part of a wider visit including Hungary. END SUMMARY.

12. The GoA, driven by NGOs, plays a leading role in anti-biotech efforts within the EU. Austrian public opinion reflects the hard-line, anti-biotech, emotional mindset of politicians and NGOs. Post considers that negative public attitudes in Austria towards green biotechnology cannot be changed in the near future. However, there is a chance to slowly bring the discussion to a more scientific focus by informing interested stakeholders in the agricultural sector. Therefore, the main goal of the speakers' outreach program in Austria was to explain to Austrian farmers and agricultural experts why U.S. farmers grow biotech crops from a practical point of view. The U.S. speakers talked about their experience and their benefits using biotechnology in crop production for food, feed, and biofuels. The program stressed the personal benefits of biotech crops for farmers, such as having more free time for their families through spending less time on the fields.

13. One broadly discussed issue was the experience of U.S. farmers with Bt-corn varieties to manage field infestation with corn root worm. The speakers also reported on the environmental gains from decreased use of pesticides and reduced soil erosion. For many participants it was enlightening to learn that one could choose between various genetic features ("events") and combinations of events for specific purposes. Another focus was the potential of biotech crops to contribute to

production of biofuels. The speakers countered the EU common opinion that farmers growing biotech crops are highly dependent on big seed companies. The farmers demonstrated plausibly that they are growing these crops because of the benefits they can gain.

14. PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS - TARGET GROUPS

-- Agricultural secondary college and research institute Francisco Josephinum in Wieselburg -- approximately 60 agriculture students, ages 18-19; some will go on to university; others will return to manage farms

-- Press interview with agricultural journalist from the agricultural industry news service, AIZ (Agrarisches Informationszentrum)

-- Agricultural University (University of Applied Life Sciences, BOKU). Participation of approximately 70 students studying life sciences. The seminar was sponsored by the university students' biotech club.

-- Chamber of Agriculture (compulsory farmers' representational organization). Participants were mainly extension staff members.

-- Land- und Forstbetriebe Oesterreich (association of larger-scale farmers in Austria). Participants were member farmers and staff members of the organization.

-- Government representatives of Austrian Health Ministry and Agriculture/Environment Ministry. The roundtable was

VIENNA 00000394 002 OF 003

held in the U.S. Embassy in Vienna.

15. Despite widespread anti-biotech sentiments in Austria, most meeting attendees showed genuine interest in the experience of the U.S. farmers. The team was warmly welcomed and with one exception, all discussions occurred in an open and friendly way. The majority of participants appreciated the opportunity to learn about the practical use and benefits of agricultural biotechnology. The feedback from participants and organizers was positive. Many farmers and farmers' representatives said they would be interested in the technology and recognize the benefits, but do not see an option for Austrian farmers to utilize biotech crops because they are not accepted by the general public. Tremendous pressure from NGOs to abstain from biotechnology, the political environment, and consumer preferences for organic products makes it almost impossible for them to talk about benefits of biotech crops.

16. In our experience, potential users of green biotechnology (farmers and students) show a much more balanced and scientific approach towards the technology than Austrian politicians, NGOs and most media. Austria's largest and most influential newspaper, for instance, is a fierce opponent of biotech products. Farmers' representatives confirmed that there is an unfounded fear about the safety of using biotechnology and a lack of discussion based on scientific knowledge.

17. During their program in Austria, the U.S. farmers met with one journalist from an Austrian agricultural news service (Agrarisches Informationszentrum or AIZ) to discuss the future of biotech crops in the United States versus the EU and Austria. One of the issues was the EU vote on biotech import bans which took place on March 2. This led to a discussion on the future of biotech in the EU in light of majority support against forcing Austria to lift its cultivation ban against Bt corn. The journalist was knowledgeable and recognized the benefits of biotech. Post expects a balanced article from him,

recognizing both the benefits of biotechnology and political realities within the EU. He said he will publish the article after public sentiment on biotech has calmed down a bit.

¶18. As expected, our roundtable with representatives from the Austrian Health and Agriculture/Environment Ministries was less than encouraging. Government officials, towing the Government of Austria's anti-biotech line, stressed the benefits of non-biotech production over biotech production and quoted studies they said showed conventional crops were superior to biotech crops.

COMMENT

- - - -

¶19. While the Austrian public mindset on biotechnology cannot be changed in the near future, post believes the outreach program was an overall success. It showed that potential users are keenly interested in the technology and recognize the benefits, even if they cannot talk in public about the benefits of biotechnology. It could also be seen that there is a lot of misinformation on the topic in Austria. Future programs in Austria should continue to follow a policy of small steps towards less hostile groups. This goal can be reached by informing the interested community of farmers and students to counteract misinformation. Currently Post does not see a change of the Austrian political anti-biotech line. Nonetheless, exchanging experience and information via U.S. experts may help to reduce anti-biotech sentiment in central Europe in the mid and long-term.

¶10. Per a March 20 discussion in Washington between Embassy PAO Hugins and Senior Advisor for Biotechnology Bobo and colleagues, post and Washington agencies could also explore opportunities in future to invite certain Austrian media correspondents based in Washington to briefings or programs on U.S. food security policies and initiatives, including biotech.

¶11. The Biotech Outreach Team would like to express its continued appreciation to the Department of State's Office of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Textile Trade

VIENNA 00000394 003 OF 003

Affairs and to the Office of Scientific and Technical Affairs and Office of Capacity Building and Development in USDA/FAS for their contributions and support. END COMMENT.

¶12. This cable was coordinated with FAS Berlin.

KILNER